

# What crisis? Political dissent in the *Iliad*

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There is much talk at the moment about a crisis in politics. Turnout for elections is down. Party membership is falling dramatically. As the major parties clamour over the centre ground, there appears little to differentiate their policies. The government itself is so worried about young peoples' lack of interest in politics that it has introduced the compulsory study of citizenship in schools. Paradoxically, though, debate on current affairs is very lively on radio phone-ins, over emails and in chat-rooms and weblogs, on marches, and in cafes and pubs. In all these arenas, people are very keen to have their say and voice their dissatisfaction with those in authority. The problem seems to be not so much apathy as a sense of frustration with traditional channels for expression of political views.

Over the course of this article, I want to show that these kinds of frustrations and tensions were already visible in the founding text of Greek culture, Homer's *Iliad*. Already in the eighth century B.C. (if that is the correct date), questions were being asked about the extent to which one person or group should take decisions on behalf of another, and about how divergent views should be managed. I want to focus particularly on the figure of Achilles, the glamorous but subversive figure who is the hero of that poem. What happens when the central figure of political authority (King Agamemnon) is challenged by the man who is universally recognised as the best warrior? What is the proper way for Achilles to express his dissent? Whose view should carry the day?

## Assembly language

The combined Greek forces are amassed outside Troy. War has been raging for ten years. In the tenth year, tradition tells us, the Greeks will sack Troy and make the Trojans pay for not giving back Helen. This is where the *Iliad* begins. Yet instead of the expected clash between the opposing armies, we are immediately thrown into a conflict within the Greek camp. A crisis. The action opens with a priest of Apollo, Chryses, pleading for the return of his daughter, whom the Greeks have taken as spoil. Agamemnon – to whom she has been allocated as booty – goes against the will of the people:

*Then all the other Greeks shouted their assent to respect the priest and accept the glorious ransom. But Agamemnon, son of Atreus, was not convinced in his heart, and he sent him away.*

Homer's description shows a leader at odds with the will of the community, a leader who, moreover, resorts to a show of strength to enforce his command. Mighty is his word, so it seems. But events don't pan out as we (and Agamemnon) might imagine. Chryses happens to be a priest of Apollo, and the god sends a plague upon the Greeks. After nine days of horrible plague, Homer tells us, Achilles called an assembly in order to find a solution to this crisis.

Let's pause for a moment to consider this action. In the democratic world of fifth-century Athens, say, some three hundred years after the earliest parts of the *Iliad*, calling an assembly might have been the obvious, self-evident thing to do. But at this early stage of Greek society, the *Iliad* represents a world of aris-

tocratic heroes, a world dominated (in every sense) by a limited group of individuals. A world, moreover, at war, when maintaining discipline is so important. Nevertheless, Homer stages an assembly right at the beginning of the *Iliad*. It leaves us to consider what form this assembly takes and what might be significant about it.

The first thing to say is that the assembly is called on behalf of the community. This is important. The *Iliad* immediately shows an interest in the security of the group as a whole, not just the prowess and glory of powerful individuals. The leaders are only as good as the care they provide for their subjects. In this case, indeed, it was the action of one of these individuals – the ultimate leader of the army, in fact, Agamemnon – that precipitated the crisis.

Despite this concern for the masses, however, the assembly remains an authoritarian space. The seer Calchas, who (thanks to his prophetic art) understands what has caused the plague, is afraid to speak. Fearful for his life, he asks Achilles for protection:

*Achilles, loved by Zeus, you ask me to say why Apollo is angry, why he shoots his arrows from afar. Well, I will speak: but be sure to swear on oath that you will willingly defend me with words and force; for I certainly think that I shall upset a man who has mighty power over all the Greeks, and whom the Greeks obey.*

Calchas knows what can benefit the community, but he is afraid to speak up for fear of angering the king. The way the assembly is framed sets freedom of speech against the terrifying power of Agamemnon's authority.

What happens next is crucial. Achilles replies to Calchas and assures him of support – even if what Calchas has to say undermines the most powerful among them. And this is what happens. After Calchas reveals that it was Agamemnon's rejection of the priest that has caused the plague, Agamemnon stands up 'deeply angered, and his black heart was entirely filled with rage; his eyes were like blazing fire'. He rounds on Calchas, calling him a 'prophet of evil'. But he does no more than abuse him with insults; Achilles' offer of protection has worked.

## Stand up for your rights

It is important that it is Achilles who protect Calchas, for a number of reasons. First, he is the most physically powerful and widely respected of the Greeks. Homer repeatedly calls him the 'best' of the soldiers. Second, he is the main hero of the epic. When Achilles speaks, we know we are to take note. Achilles is the one who calls the first assembly, the one who invites anybody to speak, who defends the right for Calchas to speak. It is clear that, without his personal intervention, and if he did not happen to be the strongest hero, no-one would have dared to speak out against the king. In the end, in resistance to the king, he upholds the right to speak for the benefit of all.

What is being dramatised here is the importance of speaking freely in the institution of the assembly. We see, prominently placed at the beginning of the text, the setting up of the assem-

bly as a place that allows different opinions to be expressed, even if they dissent from the party line. Through the action of its main hero, Achilles, the *Iliad* establishes the assembly as an institution that is not to be dominated simply by the word – or, worse, the violence – of the king.

Saying that, Agamemnon does not take Achilles' sponsoring of free speech lying down – and this brings us on to another important feature of the assembly. If Achilles' intervention had been accepted by Agamemnon, then there would have been no debate and the issue of authority and dissent would not have been raised to the audience's attention. As it is, Agamemnon tries to protect his status, and assert his authority over Achilles.

Let's remember that the girl who is to be returned to Chryses is Agamemnon's booty, his possession: to lose her means to lose face before the community. This explains why he reacts as he does, telling Achilles that he will take his prize, a girl called Briseis, 'so that you will see how much greater I am than you'. He interprets Achilles' dissent as a challenge to his authority: 'this man', he says of Achilles, 'wants to be above everyone'. Agamemnon's actions are construed by Achilles as a slight on his honour: he swears an oath that he will not fight again until he is treated properly, and then promptly withdraws from the action.

### Voices of reason

The Iliadic assembly, however, is not just about squabbles between egos: it is also about attempts to conciliate and placate. Two figures intervene between Achilles and Agamemnon, and each episode contains important pointers towards the role of the Homeric assembly. The first figure, the goddess Athena, appears only to Achilles, and holds him back by the hair as, in his anger, he goes for sword to strike down Agamemnon. This clearly shows that, no matter how justified, one should not attempt to strike down one's leaders in the assembly. Dissent does not legitimise violence.

The second figure, Nestor, is an old man, representative of the wisdom of the ages. He tries to conciliate between the two heroes by giving both equal praise and criticism. In spite of the measured skill of his speech, however, it fails. Even the consummate diplomat Nestor cannot broker a deal here. Homer does not show us the solution to the quarrel: this power struggle hits nerves that are too raw.

### Re-assembly

This assembly scene that opens the *Iliad* is echoed in later scenes throughout the text. In book 2, we meet – exceptionally – a man from the lower classes who is permitted to speak! Thersites (whose name implies boldness, even rashness) verbally attacks Agamemnon's practice of keeping the spoil won by others, and does so in terms that are strangely reminiscent of Achilles' own complaints in book 1. The fact that he is swiftly beaten up and silenced does not detract from the importance of the scene: by showing us who is permitted to voice his views and who is not, Homer explicitly raises the question of inclusions and exclusions within the political community. The forceful exclusion of Thersites demonstrates the limits of participation in Homeric free speech, and at the same time underlines the importance of the Achilles' own earlier expressions of dissent.

In the third assembly, in book 9, the effect of Achilles' absence is felt so acutely that Agamemnon proposes that they should all give up and leave for home. At this critical point, the hero Diomedes speaks up; and the reason why the Greeks subsequently remain at Troy is the result of Diomedes' challenge to Agamemnon's suggestion.

Diomedes begins by emphasising both his dissent and the legitimacy of expressing dissent within the assembly:

*Son of Atreus, I will be the first to fight with you, since you are being thoughtless. This is the custom, lord, in the assembly, so do not be angry.*

Diomedes not only marks his disagreement with Agamemnon, he does so by recalling the precedent established by Achilles. The end of that first assembly had concluded with the two speakers 'fighting with words' (1.304). Here Diomedes asserts that he 'will fight' with Agamemnon, thereby drawing on the authority of Achilles' opposition in book one. But Diomedes' assertion goes one step further: he adds that 'it is the custom'. What Homer seems to suggest is that we no longer need an Achilles to answer Agamemnon; Diomedes assumes the responsibility.

The *Iliad* does not start off with 'ready-made' institutions. At the beginning of the poem, Achilles is responsible for setting the precedent for the assembly as the place where opinions can be expressed freely. Later Diomedes' words appeal to that precedent, now with the force of 'custom' behind it. In this way, Diomedes, we might say, institutionalises dissent in the assembly.

The *Iliad* shows us how political dissent can change things, how a single challenge to the authorities – here, Achilles' challenge to Agamemnon – can both produce drastic immediate consequences and inspire an important precedent for the actions of others. In short, the *Iliad* shows how important it is to find a means to express our opinions, even (especially?) when they challenge those of our leaders. The survival of a community, ultimately, depends upon its ability to listen to a range of competing views.

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